The Telephone Case

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DR. Phillip Jensen sat in his comfortable den at home smoking a long black cigar and ruminating over certain events long past and almost forgotten. In his hand he held a letter typed on a plain white sheet of paper. A bright fire was crackling merrily in the open grate, and Dr. Jensen would read the letter and then gaze into the leaping flames and under his breath mutter:

"Damn him!"

The letter had neither heading nor signature, there was no writing to identify the sender, the postmark on the envelope was from a remote substation away out in the northern suburbs of the great city; but Dr. Jensen knew, as well as he knew his own name, just who had sent that letter. Knew it because it referred to a certain event in his past life, spoke of a compromising photograph and other things; only one man knew these things, the knowledge which would be very disastrous to Dr. Jensen's domestic and financial affairs. The writer of this letter hinted that a money consideration, if sufficiently large, might purchase the incriminating evidence. Only one man knew these facts, therefore he must have sent the missive.

To go back a little: When Jensen was graduated from an important eastern medical school and had had two years' hospital work he stood on the threshold of his career. He liked medicine, had been a good student and was well fitted to practice. But he had financial ambition. All his life he had been poor; he had worked his way through college, with the heel of poverty ever pressing his neck. He wanted money, but the pathway to money through practice of medicine was as a rule slow and uncertain. "Many 'doctors' are called, but few are chosen," was only too true and Philip Jensen studied the subject of his future very seriously. The ethical thing for him to have done at this time would be to open an office, furnish it modestly, put a pretty gold sign reading: "Philip Jensen, Physician and Surgeon," on the door, and then to sit down in an easy chair and wait—wait for some person to come along and be suddenly stricken with stomach ache. He must wait for his patients—wait perhaps like the "Hon. Peter Stirling" for two years before a client came along. In doing this he would be strictly ethical, but two years of being ethical wasn't pleasant, especially when the doctor needed food and raiment during that time. If he were reasonably successful in building up a practice he might after about ten years be able to pay his office rent and support himself. But he didn't propose to be poor that long; in ten years he wanted to accumulate a goodly amount of money; in 20 he wanted to be independent. He studied carefully over these questions and finally became an "advertising specialist." He departed from the hewn lines of medicine; through the papers he told of his skill in his chosen specialty; his charges were reasonable, and before very long the credit side of his ledger was getting larger than the debit. What Dr. Jensen did he did well; he was not an impecunious quack, but a skilled and expert physician. A year later his practice had so increased he needed help in his accounts and office work. A bright Irish chap named O'Brien was secured as Dr. Jensen's secretary. O'Brien was about the same age as the doctor and the two soon became fast friends. O'Brien was a lawyer and was trying to get on his feet by the old ethical way, but his funds ran out before clients began to come in and he was perforce obliged to seek work. Jensen was glad to get him; his keen perception of business affairs and his ready Irish wit were valuable assets for a private secretary, and that is what he was.

With the coming of money Dr. Jensen branched out. From the comforts of life he went to the luxuries. His rooms were beautifully furnished and he and O'Brien lived together. It was said these bachelor apartments of Dr. Philip Jensen became the scene of more than one little dinner whereat wine, women and song were predominant. Dr. Jensen was enjoying life to the full and Harold O'Brien was helping him along. A goodly crop of wild oats was being sown by both men.

For three years life flowed on uneventfully for the doctor and his secretary, when one evening Dr. Jensen said:

"Harry, I am going to surprise you."

"How, Phil?"

"I am going to get married."

"Married? Ha, ha! Well, that's a good one, Phil. Who's the lucky lady? and how about all our friends here?"

A dull red color suffused Jensen's face as he replied:

"Never mind who the lady is. I haven't spoken to her yet and don't know if she would have me; but I'm getting sick of living as we do, I want a home; the money question is easy now and I'm going to have one."

"You don't suppose the future Mrs. Jensen would be proud of the life we are leading, do you?"

"No, and that's just it. Tonight is our farewell. After that I quit."

"So do I, then. Since coming with you, Phil, I've had a devil of a good time. You've treated me well and I have a few thousand of my own laid by. You know I like the law and I'm going back to it."

"But I don't want to lose you."

"There, Phil, you and I know too much of each other to be together after you're married. You can get another secretary."

"What you say is probably true, O'Brien, but I hate to see you go. Well, anyway, we'll have one last night of it," and out they went.

Dr. Jensen would have given a great deal not to have had that "one last night." Certain things had happened which were dangerous. Neither man referred to these events, but each knew the other knew. A few months later Dr. Jensen married and O'Brien opened up a law office of his own downtown. In a way O'Brien prospered. He became a political lawyer and some of his clients bordered on the underworld. He made money, but his standing wasn't very high. After Jensen's marriage the two men seldom saw each other. The doctor built a beautiful house and was living a very respectable life. O'Brien generally lived at some political club.

Dr. Jensen thought of all these things as he sat in his den on the day this story opened.

"Damn him," he muttered, "he's playing the cinch on me. He hasn't a thing to lose and everything to gain. I wonder how much he wants."

The next day Dr. Jensen dropped into O'Brien's office.

"Hello, Phil," said O'Brien, with a show of cordiality. "What on earth brings you here? Any of your patients who won't pay up, and you want me to see them, eh?"

Dr. Jensen looked hard at O'Brien, but the lawyer never quailed. He wasn't the most pleasant looking man in the world. Unlike Dr. Jensen, he had not quit sowing his wild oats, and his affiliations with political gangs did not tend to help him personally. He was a "shyster" lawyer, pure and simple.

"Cut out all that, O'Brien," said the doctor. "How much money do you want?"

"Bless my soul, you're getting generous! How much money do I want? And for what, pray?"

"Your innocence doesn't set well on you, O'Brien. How much money do you want for that?" said Jensen with a great deal of vehemence as he threw the anonymous letter on the table.

"Oh, that," said O'Brien, with an exasperating smile. He dropped his tone of raillery as he leaned toward the doctor and continued: "You've got plenty of money, Phil, bunches of it, and I've been hard hit lately in the street. In looking over my assets I found a photograph and a negative. Both are very interesting. I think they would look well in that art gallery of yours." O'Brien liked to grill his man. He waited a minute and then said quietly: "Have a cigar, Phil, and we can talk it over."

"I don't want a cigar, but I do want to get this interview over with. Again, how much do you want?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars, doctor; just fifteen thousand, that's all."

"You damned blackmailer!" said Jensen, taking a step forward, with uplifted clenched fist. "Fifteen thousand dollars. Why—"

"Steady, doctor," said O'Brien, quickly reaching in his desk drawer and taking from thence a revolver. "Steady now, my friend, you are getting unduly excited. My request is modest, and you'll be glad enough to grant it before I'm through with you. Within two weeks you will bring fifteen thousand dollars in money—no checks—to me, or these few little documents go to Mrs. Jensen. Wait," he continued, as he saw Jensen was about to interrupt him. "I know what's going on in your mind right now, Jensen: 'Blackmail!' Well, that's an ugly name; if you could prove it, that's the head it would come under. But you can't prove it. You receive a typewritten and addressed letter, and this letter contains reference to an incident which would not look well to your friends, and you have quite a few. As only one man knew of these events in your life, naturally the inference is correct. I admit I sent that letter. I admit it to you—but no one else knows it, there is no one near to hear this conversation, so I am playing the cinch, my dear doctor," and the garrulous Irishman smiled as he contemplated the physician.

Jensen knew the lawyer stated the truth; he couldn't be convicted of blackmail on the anonymous letter and the doctor's testimony. It needed corroboration, and there was none. But $15,000! He didn't have that amount of ready cash on hand, and he didn't want to mortgage his house or dispose of any securities. His mind acted quickly.

"You've done a clever bit of crooked work, O'Brien. Is fifteen thousand the least you will take?"

"The very least," replied O'Brien, rising and laying the revolver where he could readily reach it. "I know you haven't that much cash, but you have two weeks from today to produce that amount. If it's not on hand then I'll extend the time 11 days, but each day's extension will cost you $1,000 additional. When $25,000 is reached I give the documents to Mrs. Jensen, or if she should not be here, to some of your most important competitors. They will know how to use this evidence. Do I make myself plain, my dear doctor?"

"Perfectly, O'Brien, perfectly. I never imagined an Irishman could be such a blackguard. I'll see you in 15 days and give you an answer one way or another. Good morning."

"So long, Jensen. You won't miss the $15,000 and it will do me a heap of good."

Jensen was sorely troubled. It looked as if the Irishman did have a cinch. If he could only be made to make his threats in the presence of witnesses, the charge of blackmail could be laid and proven. But the lawyer was ttoo shrewd to permit any witnesses.

Mr. Luther M. Miller, a very prominent attorney, was a firm friend of Dr. Jensen's, and to him he went and told him his troubles. It hurt the doctor considerably to confess his past, but he did it, covering up nothing. Mr. Miller listened attentively.

"Pretty ugly mess, doctor," he said when Jensen had finished. "I know O'Brien. He's one of those shrewd lawyers who will commit any crime for money, but he will so fortify and cover his tricks that conviction becomes impossible. Looks bad. But wait," here a happy thought seemed to strike Mr. Miller, and after a moment he muttered: "By jove, he's just the man!"

"Who? What do you mean, Mr. Miller?"

"Here's a card of introduction to a gentleman," said Miller, writing. "Take it to him, and if anyone can help you out, he can. He will probably call me up and we will confer about it. Do just what he tells you to do."

"Thank you, Mr. Miller," said Jensen, taking the card and bowing himself out. The card read "To Col. John V. Cheney, Monad building: Help my friend, Dr. Jensen. He's in trouble. (Signed) Luther M. Miller."

In due time Jensen appeared in Cheney's office. The colonel was just finishing up the odds and ends of a very busy day when the doctor was announced.

"How do you do, Dr. Jensen," said Cheney, extending his hand. "What's the horrible trouble Mr. Miller speaks about in this card of introduction?"

In as few words as possible Dr. Jensen told Cheney the entire trouble from beginning to end. Cheney smoked as the doctor talked, and when he paused the colonel said:

"You've got a very clever antagonist, Dr. Jensen. Mr. O'Brien is not unknown to me. I presume Mr. Miller told you as much. The principal thing in this case is to get him to incriminate himself by asking for this money in the presence of a witness."

Cheney had been studying the doctor very carefully. He noted the long, stylish frock coat, the gray trousers, perfectly creased, and in the doctor's hand his shiny silk hat.

"Do you always dress this way, doctor?" asked Cheney.

"Yes, generally," replied the doctor, amazed at the question. He even smiled as he replied to Cheney. The colonel, too, smiled and continued:

"Queer question, isn't it, doctor? But let me assure you it's not an idle one. This case is not as hard as it would seem, and I think before we get through with Mr. O'Brien he will wish he hadn't asked for $15,000. Now you, doctor, will go about your daily work until you hear from me. I promise you it won't be long. Good evening, doctor?"

Dr. Jensen was just a little nonplussed over the manner of the cool Cheney, but he would have faith in him.

The next morning Cheney sent for Lonergan. "Ed," he said, "Harold O'Brien is a lawyer over here in the Rook building. I want a perfect description of the lay of his offices and adjoining rooms. I don't care anything about the man, because I know enough now, but I am particularly anxious to get the information about his rooms. You understand, Ed?"

"Sure, colonel; I'm on," and Lonergan went out. That afternoon he came back and reported the result of his investigation.

"Three rooms en suite, colonel. The first two are occupied by a loan shark company; the third room is O'Brien's office. You have to pass through the loan society's rooms to reach the lawyer. He's pretty well barricaded. He pays the rent and sublets to the loan company."

"What color are the carpets, Ed?"

"Carpets? Let's see. They are a rather dark green."

"How dark?" asked Cheney, produc-

(Continued on Page Twelve.)